

American ginseng

(*Panax quinquefolius*)

The leaves of ginseng are green and the flowers are green-white or yellow-green. After it flowers, ginseng produces red berries.

The genus name *Panax* comes from the Greek words *pas*, meaning all, and *akos* meaning cure; referring to the medical properties of ginseng's roots. Panacea was a Greek goddess who could heal all diseases. The name ginseng comes from the Chinese term *rénshēn*, which means man-root. This term refers to the man-like shape of the root.

Today, ginseng is the world's most widely used medicinal plant! Research shows that it stimulates the immune system and increases energy levels.

<http://www.nps.gov/plants/>



AMERICAN *ginseng*

By Patricia Ford

American ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius*) plants grow to about two feet tall and can live over 30 years. People that harvest American ginseng call the leaves of the plant “prongs” and identify plants by the number of prongs, such as 2-prongs and 3-prongs. Most 3-prong plants are at least 5 years of age or older, which is the legal age for ginseng roots that can be exported. It’s reported that the largest root was harvested in Michigan and weighed 2.6 pounds!

American ginseng’s sister, Asian ginseng (*Panax ginseng*), occurs in China, Korea, and the Russian Federation. In China, it was used for over 5,000 years, but due to over-harvest it is considered rare in the wild. That’s why almost all American ginseng harvested in the United States is exported to China.



A dried American ginseng root.

American ginseng is native to eastern hardwood forests of Canada and the United States, where it was traditionally used by many different Indian tribes. In 1716, Joseph Lafitau, a Jesuit priest, found ginseng growing near Montréal in eastern Canada. His find drew public attention to the plant and ginseng harvest and trade with China was quickly established. Later, trade spread south to the United States.

In 1788, Daniel Boone collected about 15 tons (that’s 30,000 pounds!) of wild ginseng roots in the area that is now Kentucky and West Virginia. He was transporting the roots in a boat to Philadelphia, when severe weather caused his boat to sink. He managed to save some of the roots, but by the time he reached Philadelphia, the price for ginseng had dramatically dropped.

Over-harvest of American ginseng in Canada has put the species on its endangered species list, which prohibits the collection of roots growing in the wild in Canada. Both American ginseng and Asian ginseng are listed in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). The aim of CITES is to ensure that international trade of wild plants and animals is sustainable and does not threaten the survival of species in the wild.

What’s a scientific name?

Scientists give each known kind of plant or animal a scientific name. Most scientific names are derived Latin and are written in italics or are underlined. No two plant species are allowed to have the same scientific name. This allows scientists all over the world to discuss and recognize the same plant because the scientific name for a species will always refer to the same plant no matter what language the scientist speaks.

Scientific names, or species names, consist of two words. The first word is the genus name and the second word is the specific epithet. A genus is a group of several species of plants or animals. The specific epithet identifies exactly which plant or animal it is out of the whole genus. If you think about it, a genus name is like your last name and the specific epithet is like your first name.

Take a look at the name of the plant on this coloring page, American ginseng. Its scientific name is *Panax quinquefolius*. That makes *Panax* the genus name and *quinquefolius* the specific epithet. Because it is in the *Panax* genus, you know that it is closely related to another plant, Asian ginseng (*Panax ginseng*). That’s how a scientific name lets you know that they are similar, but are not the exact same kind of plant.